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SUBJECT: TURKISH PM ERDOGAN AND FONMIN GUL'S JUNE VISIT TO WASHINGTON: HOW SERIOUS ARE THEY ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP?

(U) Classified by Ambassador Eric Edelman; reasons: E.O. 12958 1.4 (b,d).

¶11. (C) Summary: The Erdogan government's serious drift on EU-related reform; failure to take the lead on religious tolerance and indeed encouragement of intolerance; flawed handling of relations with still powerful Turkish State institutions; and unwillingness to invest in a robust bilateral relationship with the U.S. characterize GOT policy.

At the same time, the Turkish armed forces are working steadily to signal their commitment to a strong bilateral relationship. Erdogan and FonMin Gul need to hear a brisk message on five themes and, since they are motivated by fear, to feel just enough doubt about our view of their AKP government that they brace up. End summary.

¶12. (C) Three negative trends in the Erdogan government's domestic and foreign policy form the backdrop to Erdogan and Gul's June 8 call on President Bush and Gul's meeting with Secretary Rice. These trends have had a debilitating impact

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on the U.S. ability to work strategically with Turkey.

¶13. (C) First is a combination of retrenchment on reform; drift on preparations for EU harmonization; and degradation of an already troubling environment for religious freedom and tolerance. Second is deep tension and mistrust between the Erdogan government and core institutions of the Turkish State (Presidency, armed forces, judiciary, bureaucracy). Third is the government's long-term neglect, and then merely perfunctory affirmation, of the value of strong relations with the U.S., accompanied by a ceaseless search for "Eurasian" or Arab-Muslim world alternatives to the U.S/NATO.

Reform, EU Candidacy, Religious Tolerance Under Pressure

¶14. (C) The Erdogan government's post-December 2004 retreat on political reforms (e.g., inclusion of retrograde articles in the revised criminal code), ambivalence about economic reform and indiscipline in its relationship with the IMF, as well as indifference to the poor conditions for foreign direct investment concern a broad spectrum of our contacts. Erdogan's aggressive legal suits against caricaturists and GOT pressure on the media and universities to conform to the government line (on May 24 Justice Minister Cicek forced Bogazici University to postpone an alternative-view conference on the Armenian tragedy of 1915 by accusing the organizers of "stabbing Turkey in the back") raise sharp questions about Erdogan's and his AK party's (AKP) commitment to freedom of expression and an open society.

¶15. (C) There is an attendant serious drift in preparations for the long, grueling process of EU harmonization, scheduled to start October 3. Although Erdogan has suddenly announced the appointment of Economy Minister Babacan as chief negotiator, all our contacts who have expressed an opinion say Babacan lacks the political clout to sell the EU positions to the cabinet and to ensure coherent harmonization in ministries. Turkey is unequipped to manage the consequences of the upcoming French and Dutch referenda on the EU constitution or the foreseeable shift in German policy on Turkey's EU candidacy if the CDU-CSU wins what are expected to be early German general elections in September. In this context, Erdogan's recent accusation that some EU member states aim to divide Turkey, a clumsy attempt to outflank resurgent nationalism, has in fact contributed to the spread of a surly, defeatist attitude toward the EU.

¶16. (C) In addition, the Erdogan government refuses to reopen the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Halki seminary, shut by the Turkish State in 1971, on terms acceptable to the Patriarchate and rejects the ecumenical status of the Patriarchate. The government continues a long-standing policy of malign neglect toward religious minorities by failing to ensure rapid and fair restitution of many hundreds of properties confiscated by the State from mainly Christian, but also some Jewish, foundations. Religious tolerance, never as high in practice as on paper, has degraded further. The government has stirred up anti-Christian feelings by

attacking missionary activities through statements by ministers and an anti-Christian sermon drafted and disseminated nationwide on March 11 by the Religious Affairs Directorate, which is attached to the Prime Ministry. Long-term resident American pastors have begun to be assaulted or threatened by e-mail in incidents across the country. Anti-Semitism is more visible than before.

17. (C) All the more troubling is the government's combination of the politics of denial that these glaringly obvious negative trends exist and politics of intimidation against anyone who points out the open scissors between GOT claims and reality. In this latter regard, GOT complaints about alleged "Islamophobia" in the West are a hypocritical smokescreen to obscure the intolerance against "the other" in Turkey.

Government-State Tensions: Implications for Governance

18. (C) Government-State relations have often been strained in Turkey, but the terminal mistrust between AKP and deeply-rooted State institutions has caused a breakdown in what limited dialogue existed at the beginning of AKP's tenure. Erdogan and his party complain that the State is trying to apply a harsh and sclerotic Kemalist brake on popular will. The State, most prominently in CHOD Ozkok's nationally-televised April 20 address, warns in turn that it will not tolerate what it perceives as (1) the AKP government's failure to tackle growing street crime, abiding poverty, and corruption; (2) the government's lack of a coherent policy to deal with the PKK and the Kurdish question; and (3) AKP's attempt to infiltrate and capture the State with an Islamist (anti-secular) ideology.

19. (S) The most sober, experienced observers of AKP and of the Turkish State among our contacts see a confrontation brewing. These contacts note that the only factors protecting AKP are Erdogan's ability to preserve his heartland popularity and the current lack of a realistic political alternative on the one hand and, on the other, the State's reluctance to be blamed for any breakdown in Turkey's EU accession process while the process appears to be moving forward.

10. (S) But our contacts, some within AKP, assess Erdogan and AKP as clueless; visionless; corrupt; and certain to alienate the State further through ill-timed, ill-explained initiatives. Our contacts predict that, step by step, the State will use all constitutional means to exploit fissures among, and expose the corruption within, the various factions in the conglomerate that is AKP. The journalist who has consistently maintained the best access to the whole spectrum of AKP agrees with the judgment that Turkey can expect a "post-post-modern" (i.e., constitutionally-grounded and more indirect than the "post-modern" move against the Islamist Erbakan government in 1997) easing of AKP from power over the next two years.

AKP's Search for Foreign Policy "Alternatives"

11. (C) The contrast between the State and government is equally stark in foreign policy. Over the past six months Turkish CHOD Ozkok and deputy CHOD Basbug have repeatedly expounded -- in Ozkok's April 20 address in the name not of TGS but of the Turkish State -- a comprehensive vision of Turkey's foreign policy priorities with the U.S. in first place. In his April 20 speech Ozkok emphasized the resilience and pride of place of bilateral relations with the U.S.; cogently promoted the U.S. Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative; drew attention to strong concerns about Iran's nuclear policies; expressed skepticism about Syria; and articulated caution about Russia. At the same time he reverted to more restrictive language on Cyprus and was quite harsh in his assessment of Greek policy toward Turkey.

12. (C) In contrast, while searching for a way ahead on Cyprus and reluctantly bringing Turkey's Iraq policy more into line with ours, Erdogan and Gul avoided any strong public commitment to the bilateral relationship for their first two and a half years in power. Indeed, their anti-U.S. outbursts during the Fallujah and Tal Afar operations in autumn 2004 played to the worst, most ignorant anti-American Islamist prejudices in Turkey.

13. (C) Only belatedly, and each time lagging behind Ozkok and Basbug's declarations, have they recently expressed any support for the relationship, and then mostly in a perfunctory manner. Only in the run-up to the June 8 White House meeting have they exercised any influence on a normally rabid press, both on relations with the U.S. and on Iraq (thus underscoring how complicit they were in the media's campaigns of opprobrium against the U.S. from November 2002 until March 2005). Their response lacks a comprehensive vision; instead, with Erdogan's typical trader mentality,

they think it is possible to satisfy the U.S. by throwing a contract our way here, agreeing to our routine request to use Incirlik air base as a cargo hub after a ten-month delay there. They persist in believing -- and implying to the Turkish public -- that the road to Washington goes through Tel Aviv, not directly.

¶14. (C) Instead, Erdogan denies that there are any problems in the U.S.-Turkish relationship (many of our contacts predict Erdogan will use his White House meeting to assert that his stewardship is successful). Gul and his close collaborator Ahmet Davutoglu, whose Malaysianist/hard-line Sunni views appear to have deep influence on the government's foreign-policy "strategizing", continue to search for alternatives to the U.S./NATO in Syria, Iran, "Eurasia", and the Arab and broader Muslim world. In this regard, Davutoglu has asserted publicly and privately that the U.S. has been forced to come to terms with both Turkey's "indispensability" and the fact that Turkey has "viable alternatives".

Delivering a Tough Message to Erdogan

¶15. (C) For all his swagger, Erdogan is at heart afraid of losing the power he so long and so desperately pursued. He will react counter-productively to naked threats. But it is possible to motivate him by indirectly raising doubts in his mind about our patience and our view of his performance. Gul is far more ideologically Islamist than Erdogan, but equally susceptible to artfully sown doubts.

¶16. (C) We therefore suggest that President Bush may wish to focus above all on five messages:

--The world is changing and the U.S. is determined to move with, and harness these changes in Iraq, the Broader Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe; Turkey has a chance to join us or lag behind.

--Our government-to-government relations cannot develop robustly if the Turkish government does not own the relationship and lead public opinion; what counts are actions, not words.

--Steady, transparent, fair, open-society reform is crucial; it is important for AKP to correct the widespread impression that it has a hidden agenda; we would not want to see reform that does not have the support of the Turkish State and broader segments of society lead to confrontation.

--Religious tolerance and religious freedom are paramount, and we are deeply disturbed by ugly trends in Turkey; we have invested considerable diplomatic capital to ensure that the EU keeps its door open to predominantly Muslim Turkey, but Turkey has to deliver equally resolutely, broadly, tangibly and consistently on freedom of religion and tolerance.

--The GOT must lead Turkey boldly into Europe; conciliating extremist nationalists will block Turkey's progress and provide no viable avenue for Erdogan and Gul to lead the country to full prosperity that benefits the common man.

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